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ABSTRACT

One of the most dramatic changes in the American culture in recent years is the emergence of a family unit experiencing stages of disruption and reorganization as a common pattern. The stereotypical middle-class, suburban family continues to exist, but other variations of families exist also, family units for which past guidelines and assumptions based on the "normal" nuclear family may not be appropriate. Divorce can have positive or negative effects on the adults and children involved. The legal, social, psychological, economic and other lifestyle changes can be overwhelming. On the other hand, adults and children may be freed to establish new roles and relationships, according to some writers. Most research indicates that the child's developmental level is a significant factor in adjustment to divorce. Qualitative and quantitative differences appear to exist in the way children of varying developmental levels respond to the divorce process. This paper reviews and summarizes the research describing the effects of divorce at varying age levels, and enumerates factors which contribute to good adjustment after divorce. The paper also presents 12 areas in need of further research (e.g, ages of development at which divorce has the most adverse consequences, adverse effects of the divorce process on academic achievement, and types of conflict most harmful to children), with comments on most areas. (Author/WAS)

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THE IMPACT OF THE DIVORCE PROCESS ON THE FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

The Impact of the Divorce Process on the Family

One of the most dramatic changes in the American culture in recent years has been the emergence of a family unit experiencing stages of disruption and reorganization as a common pattern. The stereotypical middle-class, suburban family continues to exist, but other variations of families exist also--family units for which past guidelines and assumptions based on the "normal" nuclear family may not be appropriate.

Divorce can bring positive or negative effects on the adults and children involved. The legal, social, psychological, economic and other lifestyle changes can be overwhelming. On the other hand, adults and children may be freed to establish new roles and relationships according to some writers.

Most research indicates that the child's developmental level is a significant factor in adjustment to divorce. There appear to be qualitative and quantitative differences in the way children of varying developmental levels respond to the divorce process. The research describing these effects at varying age levels is reviewed and summarized, and the factors contributing to good adjustment after divorce are enumerated. In addition, the presentation poses 12 areas in need of further research, with comments on most questions.

The Impact of the Divorce Process on the Family

One of the most dramatic changes in American culture in recent years has been the emergence of a family unit experiencing stages of disruption and reorganization as a common pattern. According to Daniel Calvin, a psychologist interested in legal and social matters, the so-called normal American family, which is stereotypically characterized as the white, middle-class, monogamous, suburban, father-at-work, mother-and-children-at-home family, may be more of a nostalgic dream than reality. (cited in Stuart and Abt, 1981). This definition excludes a large segment of the population since it is estimated that 40-50% of all children will live in a single-parent home at some time during their life. Nuclear families continue to exist, but other family variations also exist--family units for which guidelines and assumptions used in the past to interpret "normal" adjustment may not be appropriate for examining the present day family with its many variations and changing roles. The family created by divorce must be considered as well as the stereotypical intact family. Calvin (cited in Stuart and Abt, 1981) contends that "The idea that the nuclear family is 'normal' while that of divorce is 'pathological' is absurd." Lazarus (1980) argues that to use the old stereotypes of the "broken" home is to label single parents and their children as "disadvantaged" and to ignore the many well adjusted families headed by a single parent. This discussion will focus on the evolving family unit, passing through stages of disruption and reorganization as a result of divorce or death of a spouse, single-parenting and step-parenting in reorganized or blended families.

Dlugokinski (1977) points out that the impact of a divorce on the family can be both positive and negative. The nature of the effects are

often determined by the persons involved and their reactions. Lifestyles for the adult usually change radically. Incomes may be reduced and the standard of living changed. Daily activities such as household chores and parenting, which have been shared by two, may be either increased or reduced significantly. Emotional support and sexual satisfaction are no longer available. However, the change in the family environment may free these adults to establish new roles in life and new relationships with their children or other adults.

The lives and relationships of children in a divorcing family are affected profoundly. Also, children must deal with losing one parent and forming a new relationship with the other. A change in the family's economic status, possibly a change in the home and school environment, different parenting styles and new daily routines may bring relief, freedom, and a new feeling of responsibility, or the change may overburden the children with pressures with which they are not ready to cope (Dlugokinski, 1977).

The legal, social, psychological, economic and other lifestyle changes that must be dealt with by divorcing adults and their children can be overwhelming. The changes extend over time, and the reorganization of the lives involved is not accomplished quickly. The effects of divorce on the lives of children will be considered first; the changing adult roles and reorganized family will be discussed in the next two presentations.

Most research indicates that the child's developmental level is a significant factor in his or her adjustment to divorce. Both clinical and nonclinical studies reviewed by Kurdek in 1981 found that the developmental level is related to "both the quantity and quality of children's divorce adjustment." Wallerstein and Kelly, who in 1980 published the results of

a five year, benchmark study of families "breaking up," contend that the "central hazard of divorce" is that it may adversely affect the development of the child. There do appear to be both qualitative and quantitative differences in the way children of varying developmental levels respond to the divorce process. According to their study, infants respond mainly to the emotional reactions of their caretakers. Preschoolers (age 3-5) have little understanding of the situation because of their limited cognitive development. They are more frightened and insecure, concluding that if one important relationship in their lives did not continue, others may not last either (the parent-child relationship). Because of their inability to interpret the situation and because no suitable explanations are given in a majority of the situations, they often engage in elaborate fantasies, experience nightmares, and may regress to more infantile behaviors such as bedwetting or renewing the old relationship with the security blanket.

Because of more advanced cognitive and emotional development, school age children understand and perceive the situation more accurately. Young school-age children (age 6-8) do not rely as heavily on fantasy as preschoolers, although some deprivation fantasies and fantasies of responsibility for the divorce and hopes for reconciliation were prevalent. According to Wallerstein and Kelly, the common reactions found at this age included a pervasive sadness and an intense yearning for the departed parent.

A milestone in development seems to occur somewhere between the ages of 9-12 years according to these researchers. This is a period of rapid growth, both physically and cognitively. Children at this age are very adept at covering up their feelings of loss, rejection, shame, and abandonment. Wallerstein and Kelly state that "The single feeling that most clearly distinguished this group from all the younger children was a fully conscious, intense anger." This anger was well organized and directed

toward the parent they blamed for the divorce. They often aligned themselves with the parent who opposed the divorce. More alignments were found at this age (9-12) than any other by the researchers.

Adolescents have reached the cognitive maturity necessary to understand the process of divorce; however, Kurdek (1981) found that the opinion of developmental researchers was divided concerning the emotional impact. Some believed that the impact of the divorce would be lessened because the adolescent had the freedom and ability to seek outside support; others pointed to the detrimental effects of the long exposure to the family conflict, and the relationship of this extended conflict to the successful accomplishment of developmental tasks. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) believe that changed perceptions of and relationship with parents may have a detrimental effect if there is a less supportive family network and family functions such as discipline, structure, and external controls are weakened. Adolescents are still in the process of finding their identities and forming internal controls, and need the continued support and guidance of consistent and supportive parents. Seeing the parents in new roles and relationships with other adults (especially sexual relationships) may create anxiety. Adolescents and adults may be experiencing similar life crises--deciding on a career, establishing relationships with the opposite sex, finding new identities.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) believe that the outcome of a divorce on children is affected by several factors (quote):

(1) the extent to which parents have been able to resolve and put aside their own conflicts and anger

(2) the resumption of effective parenting roles

(3) the extent to which the child does not feel rejected

(4) personality assets and deficits as they relate to the adjustment of the child and coping skill for moving into appropriate developmental stages

(5) supportive human networks

(6) absence of continuing anger and depression in the child

(7) the sex and age of the child when divorce occurs (p. 207)

The work of Wallerstein and Kelly, plus the research of outstanding people such as Hetherington, Cox and Cox, Lazarus and Hammond, have contributed significantly to the field; however, many unanswered questions remain:

1. What are the comparative effects of continuing exposure to conflict in the home vs. the aftermath of divorce?

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) conclude that there is no conclusive evidence in their work to indicate that either choice is best for family--the impact depends on the individual and the situation. Lazarus, in 1980, found some evidence to indicate that a one-parent household may be better for the children than a troubled, intact family. The findings of Mavis Hetherington's six year Virginia study cited at the 1983 Atlanta convention of the Southeastern Psychological Association (SEPA) seemed to agree with those of Lazarus--six years after a divorce, these children of divorce were doing better than children who remained in a conflict-ridden, intact home.

2. Are there differences in the reactions of boys and girls to the divorce process?

There is some evidence that boys may be more adversely affected by divorce than girls. In 1979 Hetherington wrote that boys may be the worst victims of divorce due to the expectation for them to fit the stereotypic male role--to be independent and aggressive. In another 1979 article,

Hetherington again suggested that boys may be more adversely affected because they receive less support and protection from the conflict. These contentions were strongly reaffirmed by Dr. Hetherington at the Atlanta meeting of SEPA. Wallerstein and Kelly suggested that girls may be more psychologically resilient. Bartrock and Warshak think the difference may be due to custodial arrangements which place most boys with the opposite-sex parent (cited in Kurdek, 1981).

3. At what age(s) of development does divorce have the most adverse consequences--both short-term and long-term?

Very young children seem to have many of their needs met, regardless of the diminished capacity of the adults to parent, because of their helplessness and vulnerability. They receive the best care of any age group according to Kurdek (1981). Adolescence may not experience a high degree of stress because of their ability to seek out other support systems. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) concluded from their work that it was the 9-12 year old who was more likely to be adversely affected because of rapid physical, emotional and cognitive development. This was also the age group, if you recall, who experienced the most intense feelings, especially anger and depression, and who were more adept at covering these feelings.

4. Does the divorce process adversely affect academic achievement?

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that children who experienced academic problems during the divorce process were performing at their pre-divorce level in the second-year follow up phase of their study. Kelly and Wallerstein in 1979 and Rubin and Price (1979) stated that children just beginning their school experience (ages 5-7) may be more at risk since the foundations for learning are formed during these years. Hammond in 1979 studied the relationship of self-concept, academic achievement and

attitudes, and found no significant differences in self-concept or reading ability between children of intact and divorced families. Several other studies have found similar results, while some have found differences in the achievement of children from divorced and intact homes (Smidchens and Thompson, 1978; a study by Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and Kettering Foundation's Institute for the Development of Educational Activities (I/D/E/A) cited by Lazarus, 1980). Many researchers think academic achievement is related more to socioeconomic status than marital status. These studies are in need of replication with the effects of divorce on different learning abilities and academic areas being studied: mathematics, verbal abilities, logical thinking, comprehension.

In addition to academic achievement, consideration should be given to the possibility of a Rosenthal effect affecting children's achievement and self-perceptions. Research completed at Austin Peay found that when school personnel were asked to compare the records of two fictitious students with almost identical descriptive personal data and academic achievement (only the marital status of the parent was changed), the child living in a home with a divorced parent was rated as needing academic remedial help significantly more often.

5. According to Wallerstein and Kelly, a continuing and consistent relationship between the child and non-custodial parent contributes to the adjustment of children experiencing the divorce process. What is the quality of this relationship? What is consistent? What is the best visitation schedule for different age children?

6. What types of conflict in the home are most harmful to the children?

Obviously, when children or adults are abused or frightened of violence, adverse results are more likely to result; however, are the

results more detrimental when the conflict is open, non-physical and non-violent; or, is a home full of anger and tension, but with little interaction, more harmful?

What is the effect of living in short-term, overt conflict? Long-term, overt conflict?

What is the effect of living in short-term, no-interaction homes? Long term, no-interaction?

7. What is the effect of being an only child in a divorcing family as compared to being one of a number of siblings?

No research in the area was located.

8. Is there a relationship between birth order and reaction to divorce?

Rudolf Dreikurs contends that certain personality factors are related to being the first born, middle-child, only child, etc. Is this variable a factor affecting adjustment to divorce?

9. What are the specific personality factors of adults and children that contribute to coping with the stress of the divorce process and the reorganization of the family?

10. What are the long term effects of a divorce on the child's future relationships--his or her marital happiness and parenting skills? Some research indicates that children of divorce are more likely to solve their marital problems by divorcing.

11. What environmental factors aid both adults and children during the process of divorce and reorganization—support networks, etc.

12. What are effective intervention techniques for assisting families during the divorce process and reorganization? Hetherington (1983) suggested that behavior modification helped with immediate behavior problems with children, but what intervention strategies are effective for coping with the other stresses of disruption and reorganization—emotional, cognitive,

etc. The literature suggests very few methods for working with divorcing and reorganizing families--especially for children.

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